

Will God Judge the World? • 2 Peter 3:3-7

I was 18 years old, driving my father's Volkswagen Beetle down Highway 10. The speed limit was 55 mph. I had never received a ticket or been stopped by a police officer in my entire brief driving career and never expected I would be. Besides, the VW had a small engine and could barely go the speed limit—except down hill. But that day I wondered how fast it could actually go if the rpms were high enough and the hill was steep enough. I reached 68 mph. The reason I know the exact maximum downhill speed of the VW Beetle is that it was verified by the radar of the state police officer who issued a ticket with a mandatory court appearance.

My court date was on a hot, humid summer evening. The judge arrived more than an hour late. It was so hot and humid inside that most of us waited outside. I still remember his car and his license plate number. The car was a black Ford Thunderbird with a customized license plate that read LAW-8. He didn't look like a fun person.

Unfortunately they didn't call the cases in alphabetical order. I sat through a couple of hours of cases that preceded mine. The rest of the defendants all looked like hardened criminals to me—mostly Mafia and Hell's Angels from what I could guess. I didn't feel that I belonged there. I didn't have a very good feeling in my stomach.

When my turn came to stand in front of the judge he asked me if I was guilty and I said, "sort of", which apparently upset him because he was not in a very good mood after that. He asked why I was driving faster than the speed limit and I explained to him that I really didn't want to drive too fast because I didn't want to get a ticket. This upset him even more. Almost everything seemed to upset him. He told me he usually revokes licenses for 30 days but he could revoke my license for 12 months. I don't think he liked me. I told him I thought 30 days was sufficient to teach me the lesson I needed to learn. He took my license right there and then. My older brother had to give me a ride home.

Doing what we want rather than what God wants is the essence of sin.

That day I decided I did not want to ever appear before a judge like that again. And that was just traffic court!

By contrast, in the film "Shawshank Redemption", Andy Dufresne is convicted of the murders of his wife and her lover. The judge in that courtroom shows no mercy when handing down the sentence. That court was much higher than my traffic court; that judge was much more serious than the one I faced; and the consequences were far greater. But try to imagine how much higher is the court of God and how much more serious are the judgments God makes! That is, if you believe in the judgment of God.

Seventy-nine percent of Americans say they believe there will be a day when God judges whether you go to heaven or hell. Counted with the remaining 21% that don't believe in the judgment of God were some of the first century contemporaries of Peter. Peter wrote about those who didn't believe in the judgment of God in 2 Peter 3:3-7:

First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation. But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.

We are going to take a detailed look at what these words mean, but we need to clarify something first. Peter is not describing his first century or his twenty-first century readers.

He's not saying that you and I as Christians are scoffers and cynics. Rather, he is telling us about those who are scoffers and cynics. So, please don't take what he writes here personally, unless, of course, this somehow describes you.

Peter is talking about people who think they can get away with anything. You probably know the type. They think they can make up their own beliefs, create their own truth and behave any way they please. They don't worry about the consequences. They don't think they will or should get in trouble for what they believe or what they do.

The background for Peter's words is the promised return of Jesus to earth as a judge. The Bible predicts Jesus coming twice. In the Apostles' Creed Christians say we believe God will judge the living and the dead. The first time Jesus came was as the Savior from sin. The second time he comes will be as the Judge of sin.

Most first century Christians thought Jesus would come back very soon. But, as years passed doubts grew. Some said Jesus wasn't coming back and there would be no judgment of sin by God after all.

Those who scoffed at biblical predictions of Jesus' coming and judging had a very specific line of reasoning. They said, "*Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.*" In other words, nothing ever really changes. History rolls on in a linear and unstoppable manner. There is nothing new under the sun. God does not and will not intervene in history.

There is a sense in which they were first century evolutionists. They concluded that our world is governed by a set of rules that are never change. Everything is cause and effect. There are no supernatural interventions. Therefore, Jesus is not coming back and there will be no judgment of the world or of individuals.

You might compare this to someone who constantly breaks the speed limit and never gets a ticket or someone who smokes three packs of cigarettes a day and never gets sick or the person who consumes vast amounts of calories and never gains a pound. After a while, one begins to assume there are no consequences to behavior. Life will keep rolling along as it always has.

There were two major problems with what these folk believed. Number one, the Bible says that sin will be judged. And number two, the Bible says that Jesus will return and he will interrupt history.

They based their beliefs on their own ideas rather than on what the Bible says. In a sense, they

invented their own religion. You would almost think they lived in the 21st century rather than the 1st century. There are millions of Americans who make up whatever they want to believe, call it truth and create a personalized designer religion. They scoff at the idea that they should conform to an absolute truth as taught in the Bible. They certainly do not believe God will someday hold them accountable for error within the religion they have made up.

The corollary to wrong beliefs is wrong behavior. Peter describes people who scoff at what the Bible says and then do whatever they please in 2 Peter 3:3, "*... you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires.*"

The basic moral decision of life is whether we follow God's desires or our own desires. It was the issue in the Garden of Eden. God told Adam and Eve they could have everything in the Garden except the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They were free to eat the apples and oranges, cucumbers and radishes, potatoes and pomegranates. God desired for them to thoroughly enjoy his creation with one exception. Adam and Eve could not be content with what God desired for them. They wanted to follow their own evil desires. Doing what we want rather than what God wants is the essence of sin.

But the greater point Peter is making is that those who believed what they wanted and did what they pleased assumed there would be no negative consequences. They could believe and behave any way they wanted and never face God the judge.

Ben Rogozensky apparently thought he could believe and do whatever he pleased. He made national news after he was arrested outside of Atlanta, Georgia, and was charged with obstructing officers and giving false information. He was in an empty room waiting for his attorney in the DeKalb County courthouse when he excused himself to go to the bathroom. In the men's room he found a stool and used it to climb into the ceiling in order to escape. He thought he was on his way to freedom as he crawled along until the ceiling collapsed and he fell ten feet into the middle of the judge's chambers.

Peter would have liked that story! He was convinced that those who think they are escaping the consequences of their beliefs and behavior will all drop straight into the courtroom of God.

Peter gives words of warning from God, starting with a brief history lesson. It answers the argument that God does not intervene in history to judge and that life will keep going on as it always has. In 2 Peter 3:5-6 he writes that these scoffers and cynics “*deliberately forget that long ago by God’s word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed.*”

We need to fine tune our brains to follow Peter’s argument here. It is a history lesson based on water. God created the earth out of water. If you go back to Genesis 1 the whole world was covered with water. It was God who created dry ground on the third day of creation. God also sustains the earth with water. Water is the basic ingredient by which life on earth exists.

News reports of the U.S. space mission to Mars and the two robots that did experiments there help us to realize that the central focus was on finding evidence of water on that planet. Water and human life are essentially linked.

God judged the earth with water. God became so fed up with human behavior and beliefs during the generation of Noah that he sent a flood of judgment water eradicating most of human civilization and population. Once again, 2 Peter 3:5-6 reads, “. . . they deliberately forget that long ago by God’s word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed.”

What is Peter’s point? Peter’s point is that history has not gone uninterrupted since the beginning of creation. God does not let mischief and misbehavior go unjudged. God intervened once and poured out his judgment on the whole human race and God says he will do it again. If God judged sin in the past, you can count on God to judge sin in the future.

Peter pursues this argument by writing, “*By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.*”

Peter is saying that if God judged sin once, God is going to do it again. So, don’t be so foolish as to think that anybody is going to get away with doing

anything wrong. The judgment of God the next time will be even more severe than it was the last time. The next time it is not going to be a judgment by water but by fire.

Fire is a frequent symbol of divine judgment throughout the Bible. It was an especially potent symbol when Peter wrote this letter because of the recent memory of the July A.D. 64 fire that burned Rome. The smell of smoke was still in the memory of the people that were reading what Peter wrote. It was a terrible fire. It was an inferno that spread across the city with strong winds and screaming victims. Flames burned out of control for five or six days.

The fire finally subsided because firefighters went up on the hillsides and burned out a firebreak. But then it reignited for three more days of ferocious burning. Ten of Rome’s fourteen districts were destroyed. Historians tell us that between 10,000 and 12,000 tenement buildings were completely destroyed and more than 200,000 people were left homeless.

Peter anticipated a divine judgment against human sin that would far exceed the burning of Rome. Someday the judgment of God will rage against our world. Peter predicts in verses 13-14, “*That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.*”

God’s judgment on this earth will be so severe that the world as we know it will have to be replaced with a new earth.

Do I really believe this is going to actually happen? Yeah, I do. Not that I have all the details figured out, but I don’t see that God has much of a choice. If he is a God who

is holy and just, he must deal with evil and sin that has run rampant across our planet and culture. Like radiation against a malignancy, God will someday judge our world and will burn out sin and evil.

Let’s read again what Peter wrote and then talk about what we are supposed to learn from this teaching in 2 Peter 3:3-7:

Like radiation against a malignancy, God will someday judge our world and will burn out sin and evil.

First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.” But they deliberately forget that long ago by God’s word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word, the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.

Why would this be in the Bible? Is the Bible trying to scare sin out of us? Is this to get our attention so we will stop misbelieving and misbehaving? Absolutely not! The Bible is clear in Romans 8:1 that Christians will not be condemned for our sins: “*There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*” So, those who believe in Jesus Christ will not experience this kind of harsh divine judgment against misbelief and misbehavior.

Well, if that’s so, are we not held accountable for our beliefs and behavior in this life? Yes, we are. We are like sons and daughters who are employed in the family business but still have job evaluations. We desire to delight and never disappoint our Father. But either way, whether the boss is delighted or disappointed, we will still be part of the family and we will still have eternal job security in the family business.

Why, then, are we told about others who misbelieve and misbehave? It is to assure us that God will judge sin and guarantee ultimate justice. When we see evil triumph, bad people prosper, injustice prevail, violence succeed and hatred permeate—take heart! God will judge all sin. The evil in our world will not be the ultimate victor. The day of reckoning will come. God will make everything right!

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